



Tuna Industry Pioneers of San Pedro and Terminal Island, California

Frank Gargas, Sr.

Retired U.S. West Coast Tuna Fishing Captain
and Boat Owner

Interviewed on November 22, 2012



Captain Frank Gargas is recognized by many in the tuna industry as one of the most influential and pioneering tuna fishermen in the world. He pioneered the use of the helicopter on purse seine fishing vessels and proved that it could be done successfully, safely, and profitably. His trail blazing efforts led to the adoption of helicopter use by most of the large purse seine vessels now operating throughout the world tuna fisheries. His family history is strongly rooted in his Croatian heritage and is quite unique in that he grew up on Terminal Island where he formed strong bonds with the Japanese American fishing families residing there.

Interview Abstract: Captain Gargas was the first tuna boat captain to successfully use a helicopter to spot tuna schools and set schools from the air which proved a great advantage to the fleet. He describes how he financed the purchase of his first helicopter and addressed the early challenges of operating a helicopter from the deck of tuna purse seine vessel when many thought it could not be done.

Interview Transcript:

I have been a fisherman all my life and started at the age of 17 and retired in October 1992.

I had always had the desire for aircraft. There have been a couple of individuals who in years past tried helicopter and they didn't last very long. I happened to be a more stubborn individual and I approached Del Monte [Foods]. I had 40% interest in the *Caribbean*¹, I wanted to put a helicopter aboard. They said 'no we cannot have any aircraft in a big corporation because of the liability factor'.

So I thought about it for a while and I said, well 'what if I put a ship [helicopter] aboard'? He says, 'if you do we have no objection as long as it's not in our name'. So I went to the bank and borrowed \$20,000 and I bought my first helicopter and I was in the helicopter business.

Now the helicopter at that time I think cost me something like \$50,000 - it was a new Bell 47-G5. I put that aboard and, to meet my payments with the ship, I started servicing the fleet on a 5% of catch² – I would find the fish or set the boats. This was in the conversion period when bait boats were just converting to seiners they were all inexperienced people, so I had plenty of business.

I paid for my helicopter, I proved it was a success and started the run. Everybody said that you could not run a helicopter on board the boats because of the expense and the maintenance, which I proved wrong.

I flew helicopters off of the Caribbean for 10 years before any of the other ships put in. Then, as the economic situation got worse, everybody started shipping helicopters and there was no more problem with maintenance.

Eventually – everybody to this day has a helicopter. I proved the fact that they were feasible.

Filmed by John Dutton Media.

¹ San Pedro-based tuna purse seine vessel

² Captain Gargas is referring to receiving 5% of the revenues from those successful sets that used his helicopter for locating the fish.

Photos Provided by Frank Gargas, Sr.



F/V Pride of America: Captain Gargas began fishing as a deckhand on his Dad's boat the F/V Pride of America. He worked his way up the ladder eventually becoming a part owner in his father's next vessel, the F/V Columbia (pictured here in the Port of Los Angeles).



F/V Columbia: After a very successful few years as Captain of the F/V Columbia, Van Camp Sea Foods offered Frank the captain's position on the F/V Santa Helena which, at the time, was the biggest and most modern purse seine vessel in existence.



F/V Costa Rica



F/V Caribbean: After several years successfully running the F/V Santa Helena, Del Monte Foods offered Frank partial ownership in a new vessel, the F/V Caribbean. Frank oversaw the construction of the boat and captained it very successfully and profitably for over a decade. The upper deck, visible above the wheelhouse in this photo, is where the Bell helicopter took off and landed.

Below: Captain Gargas' first helicopter, a Bell 47-G5, that his son Steve piloted from the deck of the F/V Caribbean.



Frank Gargas Sr. in his early fishing days. He went on to pioneer the use of helicopters on board tuna purse seine boats.



Frank's ships decorated for San Pedro's annual Fishermen's Fiesta



F/V Pride of America



F/V Costa Rica II



F/V Columbia



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